

Symbols and the Creation of Reality

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Many thinkers who are influenced by evolutionary theory emphasize similarities between humans and other species. In recent years, a growing number of thinkers, including a few sociological psychologists, have argued that humans and their companion animals share a number of common features, including the ability to take the role of the other and to have preverbal experiences of selfhood. Yet, when we compare humans and other species, we cannot help but conclude that we are relatively unique within the animal kingdom. For good or ill, we brought heat to frigid climates, illuminated the darkness, erected huge and magnificent cities, and invented terrifying devices that could destroy them. The accomplishments of other animals do not even compare. In adapting to the environments that we inhabit, we have adapted those environments to our needs, desires, and dreams to an extent unparalleled by any other species. There is clearly something different about us.

In this selection, Kent Sandstrom contends that what makes us different from other creatures is our ability to make and use symbols. In highlighting this point, Sandstrom draws upon the sociological perspective known as symbolic interactionism, which serves as a foundation for many of the readings in this book. Guided by the insights of Herbert Blumer, the symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes that because we use and rely upon symbols, we do not respond to

stimuli in a direct or automatic way. Rather, through drawing on symbols we give meaning to stimuli and act toward them based on that meaning. For instance, if a person throws a ball in our direction, we will not know how to act until we interpret and give meaning to this stimulus. If we define it as a baseball pitch that we are supposed to hit, we will respond by swinging a bat at it. By contrast, if we define it as weapon that is designed to hurt us, we will probably respond by trying to avoid it. Most crucially, we will act toward the stimulus of the ball thrown toward us based on the meaning we give to it.

The symbolic interactionist perspective also stresses that the meanings we give to things derive from and arise out of social interaction. We learn the meaning of things, such as baseballs, books, cars, and beer, as we interact with others. In doing so, we rely heavily on symbols and language. Indeed, as Sandstrom illustrates in this selection, symbols organize our perceptions and shape our experiences of "reality." Symbols allow us to categorize and make sense of what is happening around and inside of us, particularly by enabling us to give names to the objects, events, people, and experiences we encounter. Through naming these things, we transform them into social objects, or objects that have shared meanings. These shared meanings, in turn, call out a common response in us. For instance, when we name something a

textbook, we give it the shared meaning of “something to read, reflect upon, and study.” We thus know how to act toward it.

Above all, the symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes that our ability to use symbols allows us to transcend our immediate environments and to represent to ourselves and others things that are not otherwise available to our senses, such as feelings, ideas, and products of the imagination. Unlike other species, we humans are not confined simply to the world of perceptions and perceptual images. We also reside in a world of symbols, meanings, and values that we impose upon the perceptual world.

As Sandstrom implies, it is not the individual human being who creates these uniquely human environments. Symbols and their meanings must have a separate existence in order to have the same power over the individual’s experiences as her or his perceptions. The only possible source of that separate existence is other humans. Symbols are necessarily shared. And, if what is uniquely human is uniquely social, then understanding human experience necessarily requires an understanding of social life.

All human behavior consists of, or is dependent upon, the use of symbols. Human behavior is symbolic behavior; symbolic behavior is human behavior. The symbol is the universe of humanity.

—Leslie A. White

Compared with other animals, we find ourselves in a unique situation as human beings. We do not live directly in a state of nature, nor do we see “reality” nakedly. As the philosopher Suzanne Langer (1948) observed, human perception consists of the continuous creation and re-creation of images and symbols. Our only means of taking in the world of objects and people around us is through continually re-creating them. In other words, we convert our experiences into images and symbols. Our brains do not simply record or relay what is going on “outside” or “inside” of us. Instead, when processing information or sensations, our brains act like giant, symbolic transformers,

changing virtually everything that passes through them into a stream of symbols.

According to Langer, this tendency for our brains to act like symbolic transformers is a crucial feature of our experience as human beings. It allows us to have a “constructive” rather than passive relationship to our environment. We do not simply react to things that exist in the world around us. Nor do we see these things “in the raw.” Instead, we transform and interpret them through a symbolizing process. Thus, as we participate in the process of perception—the process of making sense of stimuli in our environment—we rely on our capacity to create and use symbols. Through this capacity we transform the stimuli that bombard us, such as a cluster of stars on a clear night, into a coherent and meaningful pattern—in this case, a pattern we call the Big Dipper.

Sensation

Throughout our lives we are barraged by a flood of sensory experiences. We swim in a sea of sensation. Consider this very moment. Your attention is (I hope) focused on this chapter and the words you are reading in this sentence. But pause for a moment and think of all the other things you are experiencing. For instance, what else are you seeing besides this page and sentence? Are you seeing what’s above, below, and to the sides of the page? Are you periodically glancing up to see what else is around you? Are you being affected by anything besides visual images? For instance, are you hearing any noises or smelling any odors? Do you feel any pressures on your body, such as the touch of your fingers on the book, your back on a chair, your elbows on a table, or your feet on the floor? After briefly paying attention to what’s going on around you, you can recognize that you are being bombarded with stimuli.

If we remained at the level of sensation, we would soon be overwhelmed. Our world would lack continuity or coherence. Life would be a booming, buzzing confusion of lights, sounds, smells, colors, and movements. We would bounce

from one experience to another with little if any direction or purpose. We would not be able to organize our sensory experiences into broader patterns or configurations. Our perceptions, then, are not merely a matter of sensation; they also involve interpretation. Our senses provide us with the raw data to arrive at meaning.

As commonly recognized, we rely on five major senses as we interact with and gather information from our environment: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. When any of these senses are stimulated, as when the receptors in our ears respond to sound waves emitted by a roaring engine, they transmit a message to the brain, which processes this input. Each sense can be aroused by external stimuli, as when we are moved by a beautiful sunset, refreshed by a cool breeze or, less pleasantly, repulsed by the smell of manure. Our senses can also be aroused by stimuli that come from sources within us, as when we feel a pang of hunger, a flash of pain, or a surge of sexual desire.

Most important, we do not react passively to our environment. We actively seek out stimuli through our bodily senses. For instance, we move our head, eyes, hands, and body to explore the sensations of light, sound, and contact that surround us. In this process, we extract information about our sensations and select what is relevant. We turn toward or away from shades of light. We turn toward or away from various noises, such as a whispering voice or an exploding firecracker. We sniff for pleasant odors and hold our nose at unpleasant odors in the air around us. We feel physical objects, enjoying their texture, evaluating how we can use them, and gauging their potential dangers. Our senses, then, do not merely receive stimuli; they actively seek out stimuli until they achieve a clearer understanding of their nature.

Conceptualization and Categorization

We understand our sensory experiences through grouping them into units, categories, or concepts, based on their similarities. We thereby engage in

the process of *conceptualization*. That is, we experience the world in terms of concepts—regularized ways of thinking about real or imagined objects and events. These concepts enable us to picture “things” in our world, to describe or represent these things to ourselves and one another, and to grasp their meaning. We use concepts because we are “cognitive misers” and we want to find relatively simple ways to deal with the stimuli picked up by our senses. By sorting these stimuli into related and manageable units and giving them labels, we recode their contents into summary categories—categories such as *red*, *tall*, *dark*, *beer*, *roommate*, *professor*, and *dorm room*. By using these and other categories, we simplify and generalize the world—we chunk and cluster its elements into meaningful concepts. For example, we look into the sky and register a collection of light waves striking our retinas as “blue”; we bite into a candy bar and interpret thousands of transmissions from our taste buds as “sweet”; we walk up to a person in a store and recode the range of sensations she emits into “friendly-looking clerk.” Through condensing and transforming our perceptions into these categories, we simplify the abundance of stimuli and information available to us. We organize our experiences.

At the same time, we bring order, continuity, and predictability into our perceptual world. Through plugging various stimuli into categories, we can link our present sensations to past sets of experience and perceptual organization. We can view an object or event as the same object or event despite the fact that it changes during each moment and from various perspectives. For example, we can recognize an event that shifts back and forth from one person lecturing to several people exchanging ideas as a “social psychology course.” We can also treat a number of objects that differ in a few ways, such as cars, vans, and trucks, as essentially similar “vehicles.” Through this ability to categorize objects, we can reduce the anxiety we would feel in an otherwise disordered and ambiguous world of stimuli.

Conceptualization allows us to sort and organize stimuli in a meaningful and orderly way. Through this process we actively attune ourselves to certain stimuli while ignoring others. We lump or group stimuli together and then respond to these groups as if they were objects. The key point is that we do not respond to the world “as it is.” It does not have an inherent meaning. Instead, as human beings we actively slice up the world and organize it into concepts—plants and animals, fruits and vegetables, cities and villages—that allow us to give it meaning and see it as orderly. Although this is an intricate process, it seems fairly simple because many of the concepts we rely on are supplied by the groups to which we belong. We learn these concepts as we learn the language and culture of our society (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1993).

Symbols, Signs, and Meanings

Human experience takes on distinctive characteristics because people respond not only to signs but also to symbols. A sign is directly connected to an object or event and calls forth a fixed or habitual response. Its meaning is associated with its physical form and can be grasped through the senses. For instance, dark clouds are a sign of rain and smoke is a sign of fire. Both animals and people can make sense of and respond to these signs. Symbols, however, are a uniquely human phenomenon. Roughly speaking, symbols are something that people create and use to stand for something else. A powerful example is a flag. People use a colored rectangle of cloth to stand for a nation and its guiding principles. This cloth evokes passionate sentiments—pride, loyalty, patriotism, and, for some, disgust or animosity. Another example of a symbol is a hug. In our society a hug is widely regarded as a symbol of affection; thus, the willingness of one person to hug another is seen as an expression of his or her caring for that person. Among the various sets of symbols, the most important are linguistic symbols, those combinations of spoken sounds or written marks

that are used for all meanings. A symbol, then, is any object, gesture, or word that becomes an abstract representation of something else. Whatever it represents constitutes its meaning.

In most cases, the association between a symbol and the meanings it represents are arbitrary. The meanings designated by a symbol have no intrinsic relationship to the object it describes; the meanings are generally a matter of convention. Therefore, the meaning of a symbol cannot be discerned by examining the nature of the symbol itself. Think, for example, of the word *rose*. There is nothing inherent in this combination of four letters that would necessitate or even suggest it as a representation for a particular plant. The word has no color, smell, or thorns. Nor does it have anything in its spoken or printed form that would lead one to automatically think of the flower it describes. We conjure up an image of a velvety and sweet-smelling flower when hearing the word “rose” only because we have learned to make this association since childhood. We could just as easily have learned to call a rose “by any other name.” Of course, if we had been born in a non-English speaking country, such as Romania, a rose would not be a rose to us—it would be a *trandafir*.

The Importance of Symbols

Our ability to use symbols has several important implications for our experience and activity. First, because symbols are abstractions, their use allows us to transcend our immediate environments and to have experiences that are not rooted in the here and now. We do not simply respond to the stimuli that arouse our senses in our current situation. We interpret these stimuli and respond to them in terms of our images of the past, present, and future, as well as our images of what is good, right, or important. In essence, we respond to stimuli of our own creation—that is, stimuli provided by the shadowy world of symbols. Thus we act within and toward a world that we have a major part in creating, a world that is inherently abstract rather than

concrete, a world of symbols that in some senses is imaginary (Hewitt 1994).

To understand this point, think of the abstract concepts that guide people's outlooks and actions, such as equality, justice, freedom, love, and honesty. At bottom, these are humanly created symbols. They do not exist "in nature" or have a material reality. But most of us tend to respond to them as if they are representations of essential truths about the world that should guide our actions.

Even in situations that have a physical character, such as sporting events, people are guided by and respond to symbolic realities. For example, athletes know that coaches stress the concepts of hustle, sportsmanship, and teamwork. These concepts are real only in terms of the representations that players and coaches make of them. Coaches presume that they can gauge "hustle" through observing the behavior and demeanor of their players. If a player displays a high level of effort, he or she is hustling. "Sportsmanship" is behavior that accords with certain moral standards of fair play and thoughtfulness. When a player behaves "properly" in an instance when improper behavior is possible, we have witnessed sportsmanship. If his or her team, having just lost a hard-fought game, graciously congratulates their opponents, they are seen as demonstrating sportsmanship. Likewise, "teamwork" is not the act of a single player but depends on the relationship among players. A single action doesn't demonstrate teamwork, but two or more coordinated actions (such as a throw, a catch, and a tag) do. Hustle, sportsmanship, and teamwork are not objective behaviors but rather depend on symbolic interpretations within the context of a sports event.

In addition to allowing us to transcend our immediate environment, symbols allow us to remember, imagine, plan, and have vicarious experiences (O'Brien 2005). Whenever we remember things, imagine things, or make plans to do things, we rely on and manipulate symbols. We also use symbols to have vicarious experiences. These experiences allow us to learn about the world and understand

others' experiences through observation; we do not have to experience everything ourselves in order to understand it. This ability is important not only for our individual and collective survival but also for another distinctive human characteristic: the transmission of culture.

Symbols provide the mechanism by which we create and acquire culture, or the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that characterize our society. Interactionists believe that it is through communication, or symbolic interaction, that we learn, create, and pass on culture. The boundaries of the spread of culture are linked to the boundaries of effective communication (Shibutani 1955). This point is important in that groups develop their own symbol systems, which come to exemplify how people are expected to think, feel, and behave. Every group develops its own idioculture (Fine 1987), or system of shared knowledge, beliefs, sentiments, and behaviors that serves as a frame of reference and basis of interaction for group members. Nicknames serve as a case in point. Often they characterize members of the group to each other and demonstrate that the individuals truly belong. Further, these nicknames are frequently connected to a particular group itself. In Gary Alan Fine's research on Little League baseball, many of the players had team nicknames that reflected their position on the team. One boy, for instance, was called "Maniac," both a linguistic play on his last name and an indicator that he often threw the ball wildly. The next year this same boy became the starting third baseman, his throwing skills improved, and his teammates started calling him "Main Eye."

Finally, the most crucial implication of symbols is that they provide us with templates for categorizing our experiences and placing them within a larger frame of reference. Without symbols, we cannot give meaningful form to what is happening around us, and our understandings of the world have a hit-or-miss quality. We combine and cluster symbols to form concepts that we use to sort our sensory experiences into orderly social categories. These categories often take the form of

names—names that have shared meanings for the members of a culture. Through using these names, we come to “know” the world around us.

Naming “Reality” and Creating Meaningful Objects

As Anselm Strauss (1959) has observed, people act toward objects in light of the names they give to these objects. Naming is an integral part of human cognition. In naming an object, we classify and give meaning to it, thereby evaluating it and calling forth action toward it. The name organizes our perceptions and serves as a basis for our subsequent behavior; that is, it intervenes between the “stimulus” provided by the object and our “response” to it. In other words, we respond to the name that we give to the object and not to the essence of the object itself.

Take the example of a green, $2\frac{1}{2}$ " \times 6" rectangular piece of paper with Andrew Jackson's picture on it. Call it “money” or, more specifically, a “twenty-dollar bill.” Based on this name, you immediately know how to act toward it. You know that you can use it at a store or business to purchase goods or services, such as groceries, clothing, or a haircut. And you know this because you have learned the meaning that the name “money” calls forth in our society. This meaning is not inherent to green, $2\frac{1}{2}$ " \times 6" rectangular pieces of paper, as demonstrated by the fact that it is also granted to silver and copper circular-shaped pieces of metal. Instead, it emerges out of a shared agreement about what the objects we call “money” represent and how we should act toward them.

As another example of how we respond to things based on the names we give them, imagine a situation that involves you interacting with an unnamed person. It's late at night and you're walking across campus on your own. After you walk through a passageway between two buildings, you suddenly hear footsteps about 50 feet behind you. Feeling somewhat nervous, you glance backward and see a large male figure in the shadows. You pick up your

pace. The man behind you matches your speed and even starts to gain on you. You tentatively name (or categorize) this man as a potential “mugger” or “rapist,” and panic wells up within you. In turn, as he draws steadily closer to you, you prepare to run, yell, or defend yourself. Just as you're about to take defensive action, the man behind you calls out your name and says, “Hey, I've been trying to catch up with you since you walked between those buildings back there! I was going to yell ‘wait up’ but I wasn't sure it was you until now. Anyway, I was wondering if you'd like to walk back to the dorm together.” As you hear these words, you quickly recognize that it is one of your friends who has been walking behind you. In that moment he is transformed from “mugger” or “rapist” into “thoughtful friend.” Your response to him shifts accordingly. Your feelings of anxiety dissipate and you feel relaxed and reassured. You respond warmly rather than with a scream or a punch.

What these examples illustrate is that we formulate lines of action within and through the symbolic processes of naming and categorization. We use these processes to give meanings to things around us and to our actions as well as those of others. In other words, when we engage in the processes of naming and categorization, we transform things, events, and actions into *social objects*, or objects that have shared meaning. These objects call out a common mode of response in us.

According to interactionists, meaning is a socially created phenomenon. As such, it has three key features. First, it is extrinsic; that is, it is not a quality innate to particular objects. Instead, it is conferred on those objects “from the outside” based on how they are named and their intended use. Second, the meaning of objects is not fixed but varies with time, culture, situation, and the people acting toward them. For example, a bank is a different social object to student loan-seekers, to its managers and employees, and to potential bank robbers. Each acts differently toward the bank, and, consequently, to each it is a different object

with a different meaning. This point leads us to the third important feature of meaning: It emerges and gets transformed through our communication with others as we learn from them how to define the meaning of an object and as we offer our own meaningful view of that object. Think, for instance, of how we learn the meaning of an upright middle finger in the United States. We observe the anger or upset feelings that others convey when they raise this finger or have it displayed toward them. In turn, we quickly learn that raising one's middle finger toward others, or "flipping them off," is not a kind gesture nor is it meant to tell them to look up in the air. Instead, we learn that this is a lewd and hostile gesture that conveys feelings of anger and tells others that we wish them harm (ironically, through engaging in sexual activity). Most important, what this example demonstrates is that meaning emerges and becomes established through the process of social interaction. The establishment of meaning through this process is essential because human action requires symbolization. Without meaning, we do not know how to act toward the "things" around us—including others and ourselves. To name "things" is not only to know them but also to know how to *respond* to them. The names, or symbolic categories, we attribute to things represent knowledge, communication, and action (Strauss 1993).

Language, Naming, and the Construction of Reality

Given the emphasis that interactionists place on symbols and the process of communication, they accord a special place to language. Language is the key medium through which people share meanings and construct "reality." It is a system of symbols that members of a culture use for representation and communication. Hence, language is the source of the symbols we use to give meanings to objects, events, or people and to convey these meanings to ourselves and others.

Language serves as the foundation for the development of the most important kind of symbols: words. Words have a unique and almost magical quality—they not only have meaning on their own but also when joined with others. In addition, words serve as the basis for other symbols. While people often use other modes of communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, and postures, these expressions become meaningful to us through words. For instance, in our culture a red light at an intersection means "Stop!"; a side-to-side turning of the head means "No!"; a waved hand toward an arriving friend means "Hi!"; and a police siren means "Pull over to the side of the road!"

Words facilitate our ability to communicate and share meanings. To understand this fact, try the following exercise. Approach several friends and tell them something about yourself without using any spoken or written words. Try to let them know what you are going to do this weekend. If this task seems too difficult, try letting them know what day it is. Obviously, without using words you face a challenging task. That is part of the amusement of the game of charades. Even if you are adept at using nonverbal gestures, you could probably communicate much more easily and accurately with your friends through relying on spoken or written words.

Overall, words are important because they offer shared names or categories through which we give meanings to our experiences and share these meanings. Words have their fullest impact and significance in relationship to other words within a language. As a part of the structure of language, words frame our conceptions and understandings of the world and guide our actions toward it.

Although words facilitate our ability to communicate and act, they do not necessarily make it *easy* for us to interact with others. The words we use are often ambiguous, and they may lead us to experience gaps or difficulties in our conversations with others. As an example, consider the

following exchanges between a mother and her teenage daughter:

DAUGHTER: Mom, can I take the car for a while to see my friends?

MOTHER: Okay, but don't be out too late—it's a school night and I need to use the car sometime to go to the grocery store.

DAUGHTER: Okay, that's no problem. I'll see you later. *The daughter returns four hours later, at 10:30 p.m.*

DAUGHTER: Hi, Mom, I just wanted to let you know I'm home and the car is back.

MOTHER: [Angrily] Where the heck have you been? I told you not to be out too late!

DAUGHTER: [Defensively] I wasn't out late—it's only 10:30! I don't go to bed until midnight!

MOTHER: But it's a school night; you should be in earlier than that!

DAUGHTER: Well, you didn't tell me a time. You just said that I shouldn't be out too late. 10:30 is not late!

MOTHER: Well, I did tell you that I needed the car sometime tonight to go grocery shopping.

DAUGHTER: Yeah, and I brought it back for you. You can go shopping now. The grocery store is open until midnight.

MOTHER: It's too late for me to go grocery shopping now! It's 10:30 and I'm tired.

DAUGHTER: Well, I don't see how that's my fault.

MOTHER: Oh, go to your room! I don't know why you can't listen to me better!

As this dialogue illustrates, the words we use do not always have a straightforward meaning; nor are they always interpreted in the way we intend them. Instead of leading to shared understanding and effective interaction, a number of the words we use, such as “a while,” “later,” and “sometime,” have imprecise meanings and can lead to misinterpretations that result in frustrating or ineffective interaction. Thus, even when we use the same words as others, we do not necessarily “speak the same

language” (and interact smoothly with them), as most parents and teenagers can attest.

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Reflective Questions

1. What is perception? How is perception selective? For instance, how are our perceptions influenced and directed by social categories?
2. What is a symbol? What is the difference between a sign and a symbol? What makes symbols such an important aspect of human behavior and interaction?
3. What makes an object into a “social object?” How and why are the names we give to people or things important?
4. Analyze the speech of a local or national politician. What kind of language and symbols does he or she use when speaking? What does this language emphasize? What does it conceal? How does it frame the “issues” that the speaker addresses? Is language an important aspect of exercising power? How and why?